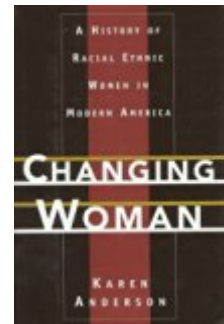


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Karen Anderson. *Changing Woman: A History of Racial Ethnic Women in Modern America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. 291 pp. \$45.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-511788-2; \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-505462-0.

Reviewed by Ronald Schultz (University of Wyoming)
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When I was asked, a dozen years ago, to design a women's history course, I chose as my theme an issue that was then coming to dominate discussions of the field: What was the place of non-white and non-middle-class women in the broader sweep of American women's history? The greatest difficulty I faced in designing the course proved to be finding texts that were accessible to students and were available in paperback. In retrospect, I wish that this book had been at hand.

Changing Woman is a subtle study of the complex experiences, subordinations, and resistances of Native American, African American, and Mexican American women from the close of the nineteenth century to the present. One of the refreshing qualities of this book is the author's appreciation of the essential complexity of cross-cultural and cross-gender interactions. At no place does *Changing Woman* fall into the trap of employing monolithic concepts of culture when discussing either racial ethnic women or their white counterparts.

The book begins with a discussion of the impact of the Dawes Act (1887) on the lives of Native American women. The Act, which sought to impose white cultural and gender norms on Native American women by stripping them of their traditional culture and gender relationships, was part of a larger public and private program of "Americanization" which sought to normalize the growing diversity of American life and culture through regulation of its many liminal members. Not surprisingly, the response of Native American women varied. Some women turned a deaf ear to the propaganda and imperatives of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, choosing to defend and conserve their traditional gender and cultural values. Others appropriated the new

views, but turned them to their own uses. In the end both approaches served to defy the cultural and gender reconstruction which the BIA "civilizers" sought to impose. The demise of acculturation policies during the 1930s did little to alter the position of Native American women, however, and the welfare state simply continued the Dawes Act's commitment to change the Indian way of life through regulating women's sexuality, maternity, and family relations.

Mexican American women never faced the intense pressures to acculturate that Indian women did. For them, racism and economics defined the outer boundaries of their life chances. Migrants from Mexico in the first half-century of the twentieth century, Mexican women faced discrimination, prejudice, poverty, and inequality in an Anglo world that saw them as nothing more than readily exploitable sources of labor. Yet, despite these debilities, Mexican American women used their position in the working world to forge new family and gender roles at home. Their actions always fraught with ambiguity, Anderson reveals the ways in which Mexican American women learned to navigate the "borderlands" between traditional male-female roles and workplace independence and activism.

Even more than the other groups, race defined the lives of African American women. Because racism and job discrimination limited the ability of African American men to create patriarchal gender relations, the position of women in African American culture was always distinct from those of their white and non-white counterparts. But the fact that African American women had always to work did not necessarily mean that gender relationships within the black world were equal, for African

American women had to deal with the intense psychological and social problems associated with the symbolic “emasculatation” of African American men. It was not until the rise of the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, Anderson claims, that some African American women were able to achieve upward mobility and a degree of equity in both the white and black worlds. Yet even then, she concludes, low-paying and insecure jobs have kept most African American women economically dependent on men or the welfare state.

Changing Woman confirms much of the past decade’s work on the history of non-white women, revealing their exploitation as well as their resistance to economic and gender discrimination. In the final analysis, however, it is the multidimensionality of the collective portraits of these women that makes this both a mature work of interpretation and a fine teaching tool. Throughout the book, Anderson displays an uncommon eye for telling details that both support her thesis and will serve to grasp and maintain student interest.

The only significant shortcoming of the book, in fact, is its abrupt ending. After more than 200 pages of close

analysis of Native American, Mexican American, and African American women, the book begs for a concluding chapter comparing the experiences of the women who occupy its pages. Were there common threads unifying the experiences of these non-white women? Or were their experiences essentially different? How were their experiences similar or different from their white, middle-class counterparts? What were the relative strengths and weaknesses of each group of racial ethnic women in their relationships with a broader white- and male-dominated world? And, most importantly, what do the histories of these disparate groups of women tell us about race, gender, and class in modern America? This would have been a stronger book had these questions been addressed, but ultimately they do not detract greatly from a convincing and useful book. *Changing Woman* should have a long and successful career in college classrooms; it certainly deserves no less.

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